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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY: PRO-KURDISH DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY PARTY
POISED TO MAKE ELECTORAL GAINS IN SOUTHEAST

REF: ADANA 43

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary and comment: The symbolism of victory in the March 2009 local elections is helping fuel the rapidly rising tension and violence in Turkey's Southeast (reftel). PM Erdogan's repeated visits to the region in recent weeks are part of the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP's) strategy to improve on its tremendous success in 2007 parliamentary elections, when it surprised many observers by capturing 55 percent of the votes in the overwhelmingly Kurdish region. AKP leaders in the region believe their party's reputation for efficiently running municipalities, delivering services, and building infrastructure will help them retain their current mayorships and accomplish the significant symbolic feat of besting the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) in its stronghold of Diyarbakir. DTP, fearful of a defeat that would show AKP's 2007 victory was no mere aberration, has been energizing its base for the past year and is now ramping up protests to provoke harsh reactions by police and create voter sympathy for DTP. Though many southeastern residents resent such divisive tactics, their disillusionment with AKP's failure to meet its promises to address the Kurdish issue outweighs their disappointment with DTP. In the Southeast, the Kurdish issue trumps all, and barring the very unlikely event of a major policy shift by AKP, DTP appears poised to perform strongly in local elections. End summary and comment.

AKP Eyes "Fortress" of Diyarbakir

12. (C) AKP leaders in Diyarbakir, Sanliurfa, and Mardin told us performing well in the Southeast in March 2009 local elections is a critical part of AKP's strategy to improve on its tremendous success in July 2007 national elections, when the party won 55 percent of the vote in the region. Diyarbakir Chairman Ahmet Fikret Ocal told us that winning the Diyarbakir metropolitan mayorship is at the center of AKP's quest to demonstrate that it is the party of all of Turkey. Though the party is still carefully vetting possible candidates, Ocal said he is confident of a victory that will shatter DTP's notion that Diyarbakir is its "fortress." Ocal told us voters' main concern in local elections is unemployment and the quality of municipal administration. He said DTP had failed to improve ailing infrastructure and services in Diyarbakir city and 12 sub municipalities, while AKP's reputation for competent municipal management would

give it an electoral boost. Ocal thought that AKP's thorough door-to-door campaign would help it win 10 of Diyarbakir province's 13 mayorships and increase its 19 Provincial General Assembly seats to over 30.

13. (C) Sanliurfa Provincial Party Chairman Ahmet Esref Fakibaba and Mardin AKP Mayor Metin Pamukcu assured us AKP would retain those mayorships in both cities and would expand their already large majorities in their Provincial General Assemblies and Municipal Assemblies. Both said their constituents rank job creation as the top issue in local elections. AKP's record of strengthening development in the region and improving municipal services would also allow the party to retain its mayorships in the key cities of Van, Siirt, and Bitlis.

14. (C) DTP's efforts to ratchet up tension will backfire, according to these AKP contacts. Ocal told us that "our citizens know that DTP is carrying out a campaign based on fear and terror." It was common knowledge that DTP and the PKK had used threats to force shopkeepers to close their shops during PM Erdogan's recent visit and coordinated a shut down of trash pick-up and other local services. Meanwhile, according to Ocal, AKP is working to meet people's essential needs by providing the poor with food and coal, and working to create financial incentives to bring investment and development to the region. Fakibaba agreed that DTP's "violent methods" would alienate voters. In a separate discussion in Ankara November 3, opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP) MP Tugrul Turkes told us that DTP appears determined to polarize the Southeast electorate to boost its

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electoral prospects. Turkes was dubious this tactic would succeed.

DTP Plans to Capitalize on Discontent with AKP

15. (C) DTP's Diyarbakir Provincial Chairman Nejdett Atalay told us AKP's predictions were wildly off the mark. March 2009 elections would be a referendum on AKP's policies, and AKP would lose much ground due to its failure to address southeastern voters' primary concern: the Kurdish issue. According to Atalay, many southeastern citizens were optimistic following PM Erdogan's 2005 public acknowledgment of the Kurdish problem and voted for AKP in 2007 parliamentary elections due to a perception that AKP was a "victim" of state pressure. Following elections, AKP failed to take concrete steps to solve the Kurdish problem and cozied up to the military. Abdullah Demirbas, the former DTP mayor of the Diyarbakir Sur sub-municipality, told us that after 2007 elections AKP had demonstrated its fundamental intolerance by pursuing its own narrow interests such as ending the headscarf ban, to the detriment of enacting democratic reforms that would have benefited all of Turkey. The PM's recent verbal attacks against Diyarbakir business owners for closing their shops to protest his visit were a sign of his fundamental intolerance and showed he is out of touch with the reality of the Southeast, Demirbas thought.

16. (C) Atalay and Demirbas categorically denied the AKP-held (and increasingly popular public) belief that DTP wants to be closed by the Constitutional Court in order to garner voter sympathy. Atalay acknowledged that closure would create sympathy in the short term but said DTP believes closure will be detrimental to Turkey's democracy and quash chances for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem. Atalay believes voters will see through such "dirty political tactics" by AKP.

17. (C) According to Atalay, voter realization of AKP's insincerity, along with DTP's hard work to motivate voters, would propel his party to win mayorships in at least 11 of Diyarbakir's districts and increase DTP's representation in

the provincial general assembly and municipal assemblies. Demirbas said AKP stands "zero chance" of winning Diyarbakir.

Both leaders predicted DTP will win back the AKP-run municipalities of Siirt, Van, Bitlis, and possibly Kars. Demirbas believes the Constitutional Court will attempt "to cause maximum disarray in the party" by closing DTP immediately prior to elections but told us DTP will still perform strongly due to its preparations to "minimize the Court's disruptive efforts." He said these preparations include forming the backup "Peace and Democracy Party" (BDP) and selecting alternate candidates, who would not be subject to a prospective political ban should the party be closed, to run for important offices.

Many Voters Disappointed With Both Options

18. (C) Many voters in the Southeast are fed up with both AKP and DTP as tensions in the region rapidly mount (reftel), according to several intellectual contacts. Altan Tan, a prominent Kurdish writer from Diyarbakir, told us that ordinary people are frustrated with DTP's tactics of stirring up tension in order to garner electoral support. Tan said that during PM Erdogan's recent visit to Diyarbakir, one-half of the approximately 90 percent of shopowners who closed their stores did it out of fear of PKK repercussions, not because they support DTP. These shopowners represent a majority of citizens who want a solution but are living "between two fires." Yilmaz Akinci, a reporter for NPR and Al-Jazeera, agreed that many shopowners resented having to close out of fear. He explained that to a poor barber in Diyarbakir, "losing just one shave has a very real economic impact." President of the Cizre Chamber of Commerce Adnan Elci told us DTP's tactic of urging people to protest by burning tires and cars, throwing rocks, and fomenting violence was counterproductive and would hurt the party in elections.

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19. (C) Voter discontent with AKP is likely to outweigh frustration with DTP in local elections, according to these contacts. Elci told us that prior to the 2007 elections, AKP had acknowledged the Kurdish issue and made promises to resolve it, but markedly shifted its view due to the pressure of Islamists and nationalists within the party. Voters in turn soured on AKP, Elci said. Tan told us that by failing to follow through on promises to address the Kurdish issue, AKP had missed a genuine opportunity to relegate DTP to near irrelevance. "If AKP had done half of what they had promised, they would be poised to sweep elections in the Southeast," he said. Tan believes that many prominent Kurdish independent thinkers have concluded that, "AKP has expired."

10. (C) The strong disappointment and disillusionment with AKP will resonate strongly with voters, according to these contacts. They believe AKP will retain the more traditionally conservative cities, such as Mardin, Sanliurfa, and Bingol, but that DTP stands a strong chance of winning back the AKP-controlled cities of Siirt, Van, and possibly Kars. In the critical symbolic race for the "fortress" of Diyarbakir, all agreed DTP will come out on top.

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